

# The Blumenfeld Education Letter

"My People Are Destroyed For Lack Of Knowledge" HOSEA 4:6

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The purpose of this newsletter is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them. Our children in the public schools are at grave risk in 4 ways: academically, spiritually, morally, and physically — and only a well-informed public will be able to reduce those risks.  
"Without vision, the people perish."

## Confessions of an Illiterate Teacher

We have long known that there are many functionally illiterate individuals in positions of responsibility throughout our society. Nelson Rockefeller, former governor of New York and Vice President of the United States, was "dyslexic." Movie personalities Tom Cruise and Cher are "dyslexic." There is no doubt that these three intelligent individuals were the unwary victims of the Dick & Jane, look-say reading instruction they got in primary school. Nelson often joked about the fact that he couldn't read because he had attended a "progressive" school.

The story is true. Nelson and three of his brothers -- David, Laurance and Winthrop -- all attended the Lincoln School at Teachers College, Columbia University. Their father donated \$3-million to this experimental school where the progressives tried out all of their flaky socialist ideas on their students. The look-say reading program was one of them, and as a result, three of the Rockefeller boys emerged as functional illiterates.

Jules Abel, in his book about the Rockefellers, writes:

"The influence of the Lincoln School, which, as a progressive school, encouraged students to explore their own interests and taught them to live in society has been a dominant one in their lives. . . . Yet Laurance gives startling confirmation as to 'Why Johnnie Can't Read.' He says that the Lincoln School did not teach him to read and write as he wishes he now could. Nelson, today, admits that reading for him is a 'slow and tortuous process' that he does not enjoy doing but compels himself to do it. This is significant evidence in the debate that has raged about modern educational techniques."

However, most functional illiterates keep their problem to themselves. It's simply too embarrassing for an intelligent, ambitious, motivated person in America to admit that he or she can't read.

## A Teacher Goes Public

So it was something of a surprise when John Corcoran, a 50-year-old developer of Oceanside, California, who had earned a degree at Texas Western

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College, attended graduate school, and then taught social studies in the high schools of Oceanside, Carlsbad and El Camino, California, for 18 years, recently admitted publicly that he was illiterate.

For years, Corcoran had skillfully managed to hide his illiteracy from his parents, friends, children, employers, students, associates and employees. Only his wife knew.

In 1986, after some business setbacks, Corcoran decided that he had lived long enough as an illiterate. He enrolled in an adult literacy program offered by the Carlsbad City Library and spent 40 to 50 hours a week for almost two years learning to read by phonics -- how to sound out words.

Corcoran had been a typical victim of the Dick & Jane, sight-vocabulary syndrome. Eleanor Condit, the 67-year-old literacy volunteer who tutored Corcoran, described how he read when he first came to her:

"He could not separate unfamiliar words into syllables. He had acquired a vocabulary of words he knew almost like a picture and he could guess a lot of words from the context. But if you showed him the same words out of context, he would not recognize them."

A typical sight reader!

### What a Difference Phonics Makes

"The difficulty he had," said Condit, "was the difficulty that every beginning reader has, which was hearing the difference between the 18 different sounds of the vowels." About a month after he started, he began to hear some of those sounds.

"I remember one day he came in with a big grin. He said, 'All of a sudden so much of the mystery is gone.'"

Corcoran's wife, Kathy, describes the awakening process in her husband's mind: "It was like, 'click.' He started

to spell words. Every sign he went by he would try to spell it out. He was spending so much time on it he'd be up all night. He was possessed. The phonics clicked in and then he went crazy to try to suck it all in."

What all of this proves, of course, is that had Corcoran been taught to read by intensive, systematic phonics in the first grade, he would not have had to spend the next forty-two years leading a life of frustration, embarrassment and deception.

Being able to read has produced a change in Corcoran. "I've seen such a healing take place in him," Kathy Corcoran says. "The angry man is gone."

### He Was Told He Was Stupid

It all started in primary school where he failed in reading and was regularly referred to as stupid and put in the lowest reading groups. Because his parents were busy people, he never made them aware that he couldn't read. He was able to hide his secret because he worked hard and received strong encouragement from his parents.

His social skills and athletic abilities made him a leader on the playing field, and he decided to use his sight, hearing and other strengths.

"I associated with people with good vocabularies," relates Corcoran, "and picked their brains so I developed a pretty decent speaking vocabulary. I listened to radio and watched films, TV, plays and pictures in magazines. . . . I went to all kinds of galleries."

As he moved through school he also developed any number of subterfuges. He learned to talk to friends about magazine articles and then repeat the friends' summaries of the information as his own. He gleaned information from television and passed it along as something he had read.

By the time he reached Texas Western College, now the University of Texas at El Paso, the 6-foot-4, 220 pound Corcoran had finely honed his athletic skills and was captain of the basketball team.

Yet if he entered a classroom where he had to take notes, he was terrified. "I would make sure nobody ever saw my writing," he said.

### **An Illiterate in Graduate School**

He earned a degree in education and went to graduate school where classrooms could also cause anxiety. "If someone said, 'Would you read?' I would say I didn't feel like reading," Corcoran said. "It was a psychology class and you could say no. Nobody picked on it."

Classroom discussions were another matter. He entered them willingly because they provided a chance to prove himself. And Corcoran discovered that if he interested a professor in a topic, he might persuade the teacher to give him an oral exam rather than a written one.

"If there was any way I could come up with options to talk a guy out of a written exam, I had to take that chance," he said.

### **An Illiterate as Teacher**

Teaching at Oceanside, Carlsbad and El Camino high schools forced him to rely on other unusual methods. "I could not even read the students' names," he said. "I had them fill in their names on the seating chart when I made it out."

"If students liked to read I would encourage them. I even took books to class for them to read. I would have them do some kind of oral report."

"In faculty meetings I would sit the farthest from the board, in case someone said, 'Let's get this on the

board.' But I always had a backup excuse (if I would be called upon to write)."

"He was a very articulate person," said Don Marks of El Camino High School in Oceanside, who was Corcoran's principal during the eight years he taught there.

"He was in the social studies area, and many of the classroom activities had to do with interaction and not necessarily a lot of written assignments. . . . As far as any problems with his reading or written skills, it didn't come out. He was very popular with the students. He definitely overcompensated with his oral expertise."

Corcoran continued his reliance on oral techniques when he began to fix up apartments and sell them as he moved from teaching into the development business.

He started by building his own home with a carpenter who showed him the construction business from the ground up. At one time he had as many as 30 development projects in the San Diego County area.

### **Learning to Read at 48**

The financial losses that required him to reduce his staff finally drove him to the Adult Learning Program, where his achievements in business and education only mildly surprised the teachers, said Lynda L. Jones.

Although most illiterates seek entry-level jobs, Jones said, "the flip side is that there are people in every segment of the population who have literacy problems. I have people . . . who own large businesses, two sales people who earn from \$70,000 to \$100,000 a year and a couple of department managers in large corporations."

"These people live with enormous stress that someone will find out about them. It's harder because they feel that they have more to lose than the

entry-level person. You are on guard all the time for fear that you will say the wrong thing and give yourself away."

## Living With Deception

Corcoran masked that stress well. His family says that he filled his obligations so adroitly that he hid his illiteracy from not only his co-workers but his parents, his five sisters and his two children. Only his wife knew.

"I didn't have any idea," said his mother, Agnes, 80, who lives with Corcoran today. "[When people tell me] I always say, 'Where was I?'"

"He had five sisters and they did not know either. He was always very good on other things like making change. He did all our taxes and everything else. So you just didn't think about it."

"I had no idea," said his daughter, Colleen, 22. "Now, in retrospect, I see things. He read us books when we were young, but he must have been making them up. When we got old, he wouldn't read. He would tell us stories. He would make things up."

"If we had math homework [and wanted help] we went to dad. If we had spelling or reading we went to my mom."

"In restaurants he would just order the same thing every time. Some places had it and some did not. When they didn't, we would get so upset and say, 'Why don't you read the menu?' because it would feel so embarrassing. But it did not seem like a big deal to me."

Corcoran's wife, Kathy, recalled that "he told me when we got married that he couldn't read. But I didn't understand what he was telling me until I heard him try to read to Colleen."

"He learned those things he knew he was going to use, like his address," she said. "But if you asked him to spell some of the places or addresses

he lived as a child, he wouldn't be able to. But he could remember every one of them."

## The Incredible Pain

"I never appreciated the pain he went through until this all started to come out," she added. "Why would I? He was a good husband, father and provider, and I couldn't imagine something like that would be that painful to him because it did not seem to stop him from functioning well."

But Corcoran had buried the pain for a long time.

"If you are illiterate or if people think you are illiterate, they think you are dumb and that you cannot do things. That's real," he said. "It's a constant source of frustration. It's more than just reading per se. The essence of life is your ability to communicate your ideas, your feelings. What reading does is give you a tool to expand your thoughts."

"I always wanted to learn. There wasn't a day that went by when I wasn't frustrated. I'm an independent person; I'm an independent thinker. But I always had to depend on someone to take care of me."

Kathy Corcoran said her husband used hostility to avoid detection. If a clerk in a store asked Corcoran to write something, she said, "rather than telling him that he could not write he would be hostile. Or when someone asked him to read he would be real snooty. Like he was above it. He developed all these self-protection techniques."

It took a long time to tear down that protective veneer and a long time to develop his reading skills at the Learning Program. And now Corcoran has gotten involved in a new cause.

He was featured on ABC's "20/20", participated in a symposium in Washington, made a dozen speeches around the country promoting literacy and is writing a book to tell his story.

"I had so much motivation," he said. "I had to prove to the literate world that I could resolve these problems. I just did not want to fail, even if the odds were against me.

"I always wanted to learn how to read and write and to stand up to the literary world and say, 'Quit calling us dumb.' And I think that is why I am doing that I am doing right now." (Gary Libman, Los Angeles Times, 6/6/88)

Comment: John Corcoran is merely one of the millions of Americans who have been crippled and handicapped by the educational malpractice rampant in American public schools since the early 1930s when the look-say or sight method of reading instruction was introduced in the schools.

It was Dr. Samuel T. Orton, world's leading expert on dyslexia, who warned the educators back in 1929 (Journal of Educational Psychology, Feb.) that the "sight" method would cause untold damage academically and emotionally to millions of children.

But the educators couldn't have cared less. Their goal was to implement the "progressive" curriculum outlined and developed by John Dewey and his colleagues who were determined to change America from a capitalist, individualistic, believing nation into a socialist, collectivist, atheist or humanist society. Dewey hated American individualism and the language-oriented curriculum that sustained it. He advocated a radical shift away from language and intellectual development to socialization. In 1896 Dewey wrote:

"It is one of the great mistakes of education to make reading and writing constitute the bulk of the school work in the first two years. The true way is to teach them incidentally as the outgrowth of the social activities at this time. Thus language is not primarily the expression of thought, but the means of social communication. . . . If language is abstracted from social activity, and made an end in

itself, it will not give its whole value as a means of development. . . . It is not claimed that by the method suggested, the child will learn to read as much, nor perhaps as readily in a given period as by the usual method. That he will make more rapid progress later when the true language interest develops . . . can be claimed with confidence."

The public schools have been following Dewey's directive for about 50 years and the result has been a literacy disaster. Books like Rudolf Flesch's Why Johnny Can't Read (1955), Prof. Jeanne Chall's Learning to Read: The Great Debate (1967), and my own The New Illiterates (1973) have had little influence on the education establishment which still insists on using teaching methods that produce functional illiterates by the millions.

In September 1988, three million 6-year-olds will enter the first grade. One third of them are already condemned to become functionally illiterate or reading disabled because of the instruction methods that will be used on them. School boards, superintendents, principals and teachers are all accomplices in this massive crime. And all of the misery, pain, frustration and failure these children will suffer can be avoided by simply returning to intensive, systematic phonics as the way to teach reading.

There are no words strong enough to condemn the educators for their crimes against American children and the American nation as a whole. An education system driven by such malevolent criminal intent ought to be abandoned by the parents of this country. Unfortunately, the parents are being deceived. They are being told that the cause of their children's failure are the defects, inadequacies, and deficiencies they were born with. And most parents believe it.

But more and more parents are waking up and finding out that the educators have been lying to them for years. That is why home schooling is

now the fastest growing educational phenomenon in the United States.

An education system built on lies, deception, and criminal intent will eventually collapse as more and more citizens become aware of its perversions and corruption. But as long as the education establishment is protected by a legal structure that forces all of us to support it, that collapse may take a long time in coming. Meanwhile, millions of children will pay the price of their parents' ignorance and indifference.

### **High Failure Rate On Teacher Literacy Tests**

A U.S. Dept. of Education report indicates that despite the extremely low requirements for passing, 17 percent of prospective public school teachers are failing the certification exams that 26 states now require of those applying for classroom jobs.

Most of the tests are aimed at insuring that teachers are literate and possess a minimum level of writing and math skills. The tests do not require teachers to demonstrate advanced levels of intellectual competence.

The report, "What's Happening in Teacher Testing," noted that less than 25 years ago there were no statewide teacher tests. Today, 26 states test prospective teachers as a certification requirement, and 18 others are planning to do so soon. In the 22 states that made their pass-fail rates public, 83 percent of the applicants passed.

The study said that in 10 states that used the National Teacher Examinations, applicants only had to answer an average of 47 questions correctly out of 104. The cutoff ranged from 35 correct in one state to 53 in another.

Applicants from minority groups have generally fared much worse than whites on these tests. In California, in 1985, only 33 percent of the blacks who took the exam passed, 46 percent of

the Mexican-Americans passed, and 81 percent of the whites passed.

Chester Finn Jr., the Education Department's research chief who ordered the study, said it demonstrated that the teacher tests were no panacea.

"Teacher testing cannot be relied upon as a form of quality control, except of the crudest sort," Mr. Finn said. (New York Times, 8/27/88)

### **M.I.T. Quits Partnership With Boston Public Schools**

Citing indifference on the part of Boston school officials, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has given up on its effort to create a science and mathematics magnet school and will end its involvement in the city's highly celebrated school-business partnership.

An M.I.T. official said last week that the university's decision to end its 12-year relationship with the school in June was prompted by recent discussions in the Boston school department regarding the conversion of the Mario Umana Harbor School of Science and Technology into a regular middle school.

According to Joseph Arangio Jr., Umana's headmaster, "M.I.T. felt there was a long string of broken promises on the part of the school department. They thought the [magnet school] would be somewhat long-lasting. But over time they became convinced that the school department was not serious about having a school of science and technology."

The university's relationship with the Umana school was part of a program that grew out of Boston's court-ordered desegregation over a decade ago. Under that program, 20 Boston-area colleges were paired with individual schools to provide resources and develop curriculum.

The partnership program was incorporated into the Boston Compact, which

began in 1982 as an alliance of business, university, and government officials to raise achievement levels and lower the dropout rate in the city's schools.

Since 1982, universities have contributed about \$25 million in tutoring, scholarships, and other services to the schools. The compact has been touted as a model partnership program and has been copied by several school systems around the country.

M.I.T.'s decision makes it the third college to drop out of the original pairing program, according to Robert B. Schwartz, the former director of the Boston Compact and now an education adviser to Gov. Michael S. Dukakis.

Brandeis University and Tufts University ended their relationship with two schools several years ago when the focus of the schools changed. Harvard University, which was paired with Roxbury High School, remained in the compact even after the school closed. Instead of pairing with another school, Harvard opened a center for principals at its education school.

The frustration M.I.T. faced in creating a magnet science and math school at Umana is suggested by its "Control Data" room, which eight years ago was filled with state-of-the-art computer equipment donated by the Control Data Corporation. But the facility has been unused for the past three years. Some of the software is defective or missing, rendering the entire system useless.

A report on the compact completed last year found that although the school-university relationships were begun largely independent of the school-system bureaucracy, the program is becoming more centralized and standardized. The report concluded that the imposition of prototypes and the reduction of funds has created anger and confusion among the schools and universities. (Educ. Wk. 5/25/88)

Comment: The school-university partnership, which was touted as one of

the exciting new ways to reform and improve the Boston public schools, has been a flop. In the first place, the universities have no understanding of the basic problem of public education: rampant educational malpractice put in place by behavioral psychologists; and second, the government schools are a monopoly largely controlled by teachers unions which are more interested in pursuing political and social goals than academic excellence. The continued dumbing down of the American people is much more compatible with the goals of the teaching establishment than high academic achievement.

## U.S. Court Bans Bible Club

A second federal district court has ruled against students trying to form a Bible Club under the Equal Access Act.

Students at Westside High School in Omaha, Nebraska, were forbidden to form the Bible club, the court ruled, because the public school has a "closed" forum which permits only curriculum-related clubs to meet before and after school hours.

The Equal Access Act reads: "It shall be unlawful for any public secondary school which receives Federal financial assistance and which has a limited open forum to deny equal access or a fair opportunity to, or discriminate against, any students who wish to conduct a meeting within that limited open forum on the basis of religious, political, philosophical, or other content of the speech at such meetings." The Act was passed by Congress in August 1984.

The battle at Westside began in January 1985 when Bridget Mergens asked permission to form a religious club that would meet on campus during non-school hours. Principal James Findley denied the request. Two months later the school board upheld the principal's decision.

Mergens immediately argued the Equal Access Act required the school to

permit them to hold meetings. But the school board argued that since Westside does not allow non-curricula organizations to form on campus, they were not under the requirements of the EAA.

The National Legal Foundation in Virginia Beach, Virginia, came to Mergens's defense and mounted a lawsuit against the Board of Education in April 1985. NLF attorneys argued that the school board was wrong in stating that Westside does not permit non-curricula activities, because the school permits such organizations as Interact, Chess, and Subserfers to hold meetings on campus.

But the school board argued that these clubs are curricula related. Interact, they claim, is related to sociology and psychology; Chess provides an arena for logical thinking; Subserfers is related to the goals of the physical education department.

Judge C. Arlen Beam, though admitting the "founding fathers were adamant about protecting religious freedom from government interference," dismissed the students' case anyway.

Beam agreed with school officials that Chess, Subserfers, and Interact were curricula related and therefore were liable to the EAA. Apparently none of the NLF attorneys argued that Bible study is related to history, ancient history, philosophy, history of religion, comparative religion, Bible as literature, archeology, geography, mathematics (B.C., A.D., etc.), psychology (man's nature), history of moral development, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, ancient chronology, history of Western Civilization, history of the Jews, history of the early church, biography, genealogy, Puritan history, American colonial history, early American education, history of parochial education, etc.

The judge ruled, however, that the students "are free to exercise their religious beliefs and engage in informal religious discussions at school."

Attorney Doug Davis of the NLF said the ruling will be appealed to the 8th

Circuit Court of Appeals. The 8th Circuit is well-known for several student rights cases, including the famous Tinker case in 1969, which held students have a right to exercise free speech in public schools. The 8th Circuit also held in 1983 (Widmar v. Vincent) that students have a right to organize for religious purposes at state-run universities. (Fundamentalist Journal, May 1988)

Comment: We cannot understand why the attorneys for the students did not assert the Bible's relevance to the school curriculum. The King James Version provides students with the single greatest work of literature of the Elizabethan era. In fact, without study of the Bible one could hardly be considered educated. Biblical references are to be found throughout English and world literature, even in crossword puzzles. Not to know the Bible is to be ignorant of the single most important influence in Western civilization. That educators and a school board can claim that Bible study is not curriculum related is glaring proof that American public education is morally and academically bankrupt.

## PURE Seminars Planned

Two PURE seminars are scheduled this fall at which Sam Blumenfeld, Sharon Pangelinan, and other members of PURE's Board of Directors will speak. The public is invited to attend. The two seminars are scheduled as follows:

Tulsa, OK, Friday, Sept. 30 and Saturday, Oct. 1, 1988, at Holiday Inn East. For information contact Glen Ellis at (918) 234-7220 or (918) 663-2345.

Syracuse, NY, Saturday, Nov. 12, 1988, Quality Inn (Exit 35, NY Thruway). Contact: Carol Fisher, (716) 496-5758.

PURE is an acronym for Parents for Unalienable Rights in Education. For information write: PURE, P.O. Box 3732, Amarillo, Texas 79106 or call Owen Haney at (806) 359-7048.